

## **Five Strategies for Creating Community before Study Abroad Departure**

Sense of belonging has become a focus in higher education. Fostering belongingness helps student feel more connected to their classroom or university, leading to greater outcomes (Gopalan & Brady, 2024). For a study abroad program, that sense of community is even more important. Many students are traveling internationally for the first time, leaving behind their primary support systems. While study abroad experiences positively impact college students' personal and academic growth (Walsh & Walsh, 2018), challenges naturally arise due to stressors, culture shock, or conflict between student travelers. Building a sense of community **becomes** before embarking on the trip can positively influence students' well-being (Rider & Miller-Perrin, 2023). Implementing efforts to foster community does not have to wait until orientation or when the trip begins. I'll share five simple but impactful strategies I used when facilitating my study abroad trip to Japan in May 2024. These efforts began once students were officially committed to the program.

### **Strategy #1: Leverage campus resources and events**

Reach out to the Modern Languages and Classics Department and/or the Rinker Center for Global Affairs about potential events related to the destination. Faculty in the Japanese department invited the study abroad students to their cultural events prior to the trip. Around the same time, the Rinker Center hosted an event that wasn't tied to our program but gave students the chance to learn about Japan and continue to connect. A few students attended this event, exchanged social media handles, and made plans to meet up again. Although the first event wasn't a big turnout, this early interaction made a difference in future activities.

### **Strategy #2: Create monthly newsletters to build excitement**

Once the roster for the program was solidified, I created a monthly newsletter for students with travel tips, resources, scholarship information, and fun facts about Japan. In the final newsletter, a student who had extensive travel experience contributed to the content, sharing her insights and advice. Students looked forward to these! All the newsletters are included below.

### **Strategy #3: Empower students to organize peer activities**

About four months before the trip, I asked for two volunteers to lead social efforts. I stepped back from planning to empower students to lead activities on their own terms. They hosted a Japanese movie night, made sushi, visited Japanese stores and restaurants in Indianapolis, and created music playlists. Every student came to at least one of these peer-coordinated events. Without faculty around, students felt more comfortable in a casual setting.

During these sessions, students also created a Google document of possible events and excursions in Tokyo to do in their free time. Once this list was complete and all students shared notes, indicating their interest and forming groups for these excursions. Then, I reviewed the

document to give feedback about the logistics and feasibility. Not only did this allow students to make connections with one another to plan their free time, but it also opened clear communication between us before the trip.

Concerns about the cost of the trip is one of the main barriers to students accessing study abroad experiences. In addition to arraigning two leaders to coordinate social events, I also requested volunteers for two students to serve as fundraising leaders. In the spring, the Rinker Center and the Ball State Foundation, initiated a study abroad crowdfunding campaign. The two student leaders developed social media templates for peers' social media accounts to boost contributions. Through the GroupMe chat, the two leaders provided encouragement, updates, and strategies to reach potential supporters. Students bonded over exceeding their shared goal for the fundraising efforts.

#### **Strategy #4: Assign collaborative pre-trip tasks with shared goals**

One of the excursions on the trip included a home visit in which students would have dinner with a Japanese family in their house. In Japanese culture, guests are expected to bring a small, meaningful gift. Since students were grouped into pairs or trios for the home visit, the same groups were tasked with finding one single, inexpensive item that represented their hometown or culture. Students understood the cultural implications of this small gift and put in time and effort into working as a team to find something meaningful. Although this was a small task, students collaborated with one another, discussed items that represented themselves and culture, decided on a single item, and brainstormed how the gift would be presented, leading to a unique way to learn about one another.

#### **Strategy #5: Use the in-person orientation to unite the full group**

The in-person orientation was the first time the entire group was in one room. I intentionally designed this session to reinforce group cohesion with team-building activities and open dialogue. Before the meeting, I asked students to submit their questions, concerns, and excitement anonymously. During the session, each of these were addressed aloud with the entire group. Although these were all anonymous, students chimed in when they heard theirs or when they related to someone else's concern. It created a supportive environment where students validated one another and offered advice.

#### **Conclusion**

Building a sense of community begins when students commit to the trip, rather than incorporating community building strategies at pre-departure orientation. These connections foster trust, communication, and confidence in traveling. Although each of these strategies was small and requires minimal resources and time, they had a considerable impact on students from the time they committed to the program until they boarded the first flight. Allowing students to take ownership of coordinating social activities and fundraising aligns with the goals of developing collaboration and agency, hallmarks of high impact practices. When students feel

connected before departure, they're better equipped to handle stress, embrace differences, and support one another while abroad, leading to deeper learning and more positive outcomes. These strategies are meant to be flexible to adapt to the course, location, and number of students. Even one or two efforts can contribute to the group dynamic and feelings of community.

## References

- Gopalan, M., & Brady, S. T. (2020). College Students' Sense of Belonging: A National Perspective. *Educational researcher (Washington, D.C. : 1972)*, 49(2), 134–137. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x19897622>
- Rider, R., & Miller-Perrin, C. (2023). Sense of community as a mediator between study abroad experiences and perceived well-being. *Modern Psychological Studies*, 29(1), Article 28. <https://scholar.utc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1597&context=mps>
- Walsh, R., & Walsh, M. (2018). In their own words: American students' perspectives on study abroad experiences. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 46(2), 129–146. <https://doi.org/10.1037/hum0000083>

# Six Months until Japan!

## Fun Fact: Vending Machines

With over 5 million vending machines in the country, these are on almost every corner of Tokyo, selling drinks, ramen, and even cake. No cash? No problem! A public transportation card can be used as a form of payment.



## Destination: Tokyo Station

More than just a transportation hub—it's a destination in itself, featuring Ramen Street, a depachika food market, toy street, and an art museum.



## Scholarship Opportunity: Open November 22nd

Apply once to be eligible for up to 21 scholarships. The Writing Center is familiar with crafting scholarship applications. Also, watch the advisor video on the website for additional tips.



## Travel Tip: Packing

- 1) A good pair of walking shoes. Think 20,000 steps per day, even with using public transportation.
- 2) A couple of plastic grocery bags. Tokyo does not have garbage cans in public.
- 3) A small washcloth. Bathrooms will not have papertowels nor air dryers.







# 5 MONTHS UNTIL JAPAN

## OUR TOP PICKS

In just five months, we're taking off for our adventure! Thank you for being so prompt in responding to my emails and surveys. Another request is asked of you in this email. I'm booking all the activities we'll be diving into in Japan because tours and excursions are selling out fast. Your prompt replies are making sure we don't miss out on the fun (or being charged extra)! Additionally, please be sure to read Ashley Coker's email from November 29th about committing to the program through Terra Cotta. We have a waitlist of 6 students!



## SCHOLARSHIPS

If you receive a BSU scholarship, contact the Office of Financial Aid & Scholarships to see if yours applies. Consider looking at the other BSU scholarships here and here. The Department of Psychological scholarships are due the Friday before spring break.

## BOOK

### RECOMMENDATION

Wanting to devour some amazing Japanese cuisine? This book takes you on a journey through the delicious world of Japanese food and culture, seen through the eyes of a non-native foodie.

## DESTINATION:

### TSUKIJI MARKET

During our free tour, we'll encounter a wide assortment of food while walking through this busy market filled with seafood, daifuku, and \$40 canteloupe.



## TRAVEL TIP

### PLEASANTRIES

Although navigating and experiencing Japan without learning the language is manageable, mastering general pleasantries when traveling is vital for positive interactions. Learning basic greetings and expressions not only respects local culture but also fosters connections. In Japan, politeness is highly valued, and using proper language reflects cultural appreciation.

Common expressions to know before you go:

1. **Konnichiwa** (こんにちは): Hello/Good afternoon.
2. **Arigatou gozaimasu** (ありがとうございます): Thank you.
3. **Sumimasen** (すみません): Excuse me/I'm sorry.
4. **Onegaishimasu** (お願いします): Please.
5. **Ohayou gozaimasu** (おはようございます): Good morning.

For pronunciation, check out this YouTube [video](#).

## FUN FACTS: RESTAURANTS

1. Restaurants are incredibly small, often only seating five or six customers.
2. Be prepared to wait. Queues in Tokyo are common, often with customers patiently waiting for 30 minutes to two hours to dine.
3. No tipping in any restaurant
4. Restaurants specialize in one food- ramen, soba, sushi, in order to maintain high quality.
5. Online customer ratings are skewed-- don't shy away from a restaurant with a lower online rating.

## FUNDRAISING AND SOCIAL COMMITTEES

To facilitate our fundraising and social activities, please let me know by January 15th if you're interested in being involved in the fundraising or social committee, working to spearhead these efforts before the trip.

# FOUR MONTHS UNTIL JAPAN!

From Feb. 22nd through Feb. 28th, BSU's Foundation will host a study abroad-focused crowdsourcing week. All proceeds from our efforts this week will be evenly distributed between students on our trip. More information to come!

## WA

“Wa” in Japan refers to group harmony with the implication of unity and conformity within a social group. In Japan, people prefer continuous harmony over personal interests. Examples of **wa** can be seen throughout Japan, but are most notable in Japanese etiquette.

While in Japan, please be mindful of etiquette and general manners related to wa:

1. No loud talking on public transportation
2. No playing of videos out loud on public transportation
3. Bringing a small gift to your host
4. Organized queuing for everything



## SCHOLARSHIPS

In the coming weeks, you'll begin to get information from the Study Abroad office if you received a scholarship. For me to plan this experience for the coming years, I'd appreciate it if you let me know if you were a recipient.



# DINING

**Chopsticks:** Not familiar with how to use chopsticks? This would be a great time to learn! Although forks can be found in Tokyo, they will not be readily available.

Learning how to use chopsticks takes some time and practice. Here's a quick YouTube [video](#).

If you need to use some for practice, stop by my office (NQ 113). There will be a folder hanging with chopsticks inside.

**Soup:** If you're having miso soup or ramen, don't expect to find a spoon at the table. You'll need to ask for one from the server. Or do as the Japanese, and drink straight out of the bowl!

**Napkins:** Personally, this is the most challenging. Japanese traditionally do not put napkins on their lap while dining. You may need to ask for napkins at restaurants.



**Looking for authentic Japanese food nearby? Try Asaka on the northside of Indy. Delicious and inexpensive, but difficult for large groups, which is very Japanese!**

# THREE MONTHS UNTIL JAPAN!

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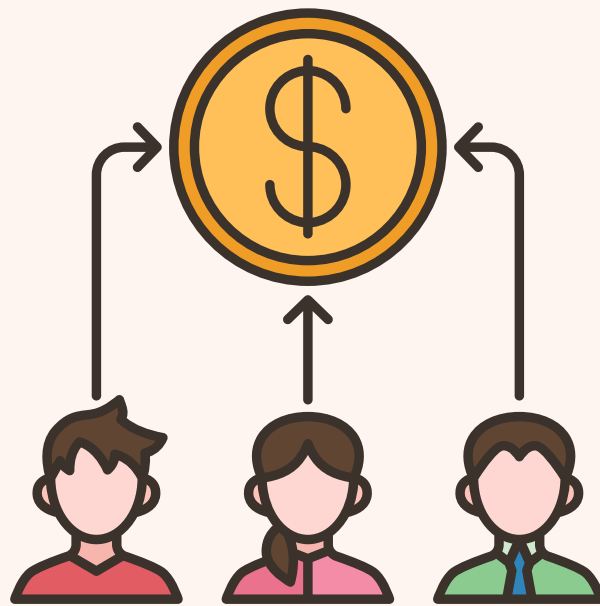
Crowdfunding

Medications

Outlets

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## Crowdfunding



With one day of crowdfunding behind us, we're just getting started! Active requests are more impactful than passive. Some tips to consider when personally reaching out to your contacts:

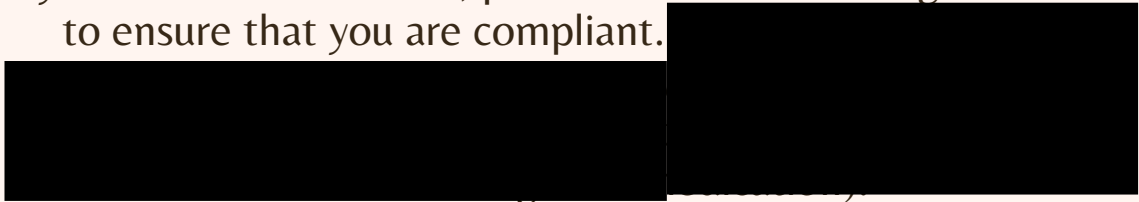
1. Describe to them why you are doing this- valuable experience, academic enrichment, and personal growth might be some potential reasons.
2. Snowball the momentum- ask your family members or friends to utilize their contacts. Are parents able to put a flyer or a donation jar in their break room?
3. Remind contacts that donations as little as \$5 will be beneficial and impactful.
4. Ask family or friends to pledge an experience. (\$50 for dinner with a Japanese family, \$25 for tea ceremony, \$7 for a good bowl of udon). \*\*Pro tip: Track this and send them a picture or bring them a souvenir from this experience.
5. Reach out to your hometown place of worship or rotary service in return for a talk or presentation of your experience when you return.

Share your success on GroupMe!

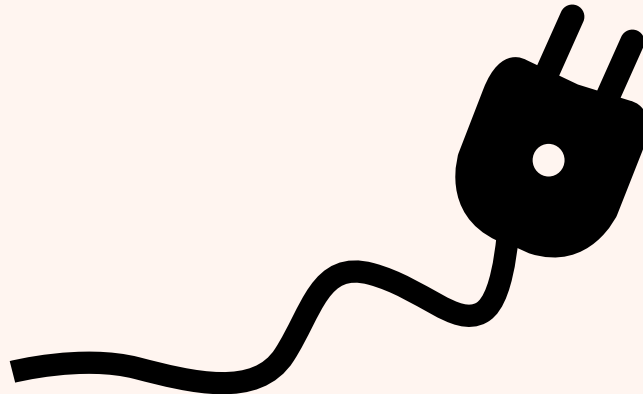


## Medications

Specific medications are strictly prohibited in Japan. These include CBD products, stimulants, and some anti-depressants. If you are on medications, please read the following materials to ensure that you are compliant.



US Embassy, Japan Travel



## Outlets

General outlets are the two-pronged type. There is a difference in frequency which can damage electronics. This [website](#) gives more information on this and where to buy converters.

# TWO MORE MONTHS UNTIL JAPAN!

## CLASS REGISTRATION

Within the next few weeks, you will receive more information about how to register for PSYS-496, International Studies in Psychology. You will receive a special access code from the department administrative coordinators to register for this course. More information will be available via email.



## ORIENTATION

## IN-PERSON ORIENTATION

In April, we will have a mandatory, in-person orientation session to provide a general overview of the class, review the itinerary and accommodations, discuss safety, and answer questions. Next week, I will send out a survey for the best dates, probably a Tuesday or Thursday evening.

## TRAVEL INFO

- Download the Visit Japan Web app. Information in this app is needed from each of you for customs entering Japan. [REDACTED]
- Seats on flights will be arranged at the counter. There is a chance of not sitting with someone in the group.



Please let me know what questions you have about this process. I appreciate everyone's patience and support!

# ONE MONTH UNTIL JAPAN!

Rather than counting months, we're not counting days!



## TOP 5 TRAVEL TIPS

Written by [REDACTED] and Lauren:

1. Use packing cubes- Packing cubes help you organize so you're not throwing all your clothes on the floor trying to find one item and vacuum sealed bags let you compress everything and maximize space in your bag.
2. Walk at least three blocks away from the masses. Prices will drop about 30% 3-5 blocks away from the really touristy areas.
3. Eat where the locals eat!
4. Embrace the challenge- some of the fun is getting lost or having a misunderstanding with a local. Shifting one's mindset during travel helps with this.
5. Don't feel like you have to get everything in this one trip. Plan activities, but also leave room to wander and be spontaneous.